

# The Peace Conference of 1865

BY

*Major SIDNEY W. THAXTER*

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## THE PEACE CONFERENCE OF 1865.

By Major SIDNEY W. THAXTER.

WHILE the War of the Rebellion was in progress, several attempts by unauthorized persons were made to find a basis upon which definite peace proposals might be made to rest. The best known and most notable of these was that in which Horace Greely figured as intermediary in the summer of 1864 with the self-styled Confederate commissioners, Clay, Holcomb and Thompson, who from the vantage ground of a Canadian border town were studying and attempting to influence the important political events of that year. This attempt resulted in utter failure and brought deserved ridicule upon Mr. Greely. It did, however, show to the world that Mr. Lincoln earnestly desired immediate peace, provided the great principles upon which the war had been waged, viz.: the integrity of the nation and the acceptance of the principles of the emancipation proclamation of the year before, were conserved.

A more memorable although less historic attempt at peace overtures took place in February, 1865, on board the steamer "River Queen" off Fortress Monroe. The *dramatis personæ* were President Lincoln and Secretary Seward on the Union side, and Vice-President Alexander H. Stephens, Senator R. M. T. Hunter, and Assistant Secretary of War James A. Campbell, in happier times one of the justices of the United States Supreme Court, on the Confederate side. It is interesting to follow the steps preliminary to the meeting of these distinguished statesmen.

In December, 1864, Mr. F. P. Blair, Sr., a distinguished citizen of Maryland, who for nearly half a century had been prominent in the politics of the country and had served as political mentor to successive administrations, applied to the President

for permission to pass our lines on a journey to Richmond. The ostensible purpose of his trip was purely personal, but without doubt he laid before the President in his interview a seductive scheme to try the temper of the leaders at Richmond, to broach the subject of peace and establish an initial point from which peace proposals might proceed. On arriving at Richmond, he met many of his former political associates, who were members of the Confederate Congress then in session, and others who occupied high positions in the government. By his friends in Congress he was no doubt informed of the growing opposition to the despotic rule of President Davis ; of the strong sentiment in favor of peace which at that time equally divided the House of Representatives ; of the desperate measures which had been taken to sustain the tottering cause of the South, the relentless conscription of the young, the aged and the feeble, the enrolment of the negro slaves in the southern armies, and the impressment of all kinds of stores and material for military purposes.

The two weeks that Mr. Blair remained at Richmond must have shown to him unmistakable signs of demoralization on the part of the Confederate government, and convinced his judgment that its end was near at hand. If in his trips outside of the rebel capital, he chanced to visit the lines of the Confederate army around Petersburg, he found even worse confusion and demoralization there. The army was made up of regiments reduced to skeletons by death, disease and desertion, scantily fed and clothed, its cavalry and artillery scattered to distant points for easier subsistence, its sole remaining line of supply feeble and of very uncertain tenure, the rank and file dispirited and so broken in *morale* that no appeal or threat of the military authorities availed to stop the wholesale desertions which threatened the integrity of the organization of the army. Mr. Blair was a man of southern birth and southern sympathies, and as he mingled in social intercourse with the friends of other years, and observed the daily sacrifices they were compelled to make, and the distress of mind, body and estate that they endured, he must

have been filled with pity and an earnest desire and purpose to plead and persuade for peace. In his interview with President Lincoln, before making his first visit to Richmond, he had informed him of the friendly relations that had existed between himself and Mr. Davis in former years, and that their friendship was still unbroken, and offered good grounds for the belief that a discussion of peace proposals with Mr. Davis by himself would be productive of good results.

Soon after reaching Richmond, Mr. Blair obtained an audience with Mr. Davis, and after very carefully explaining that he had no credentials or even verbal authority from the Union government to discuss peace proposals, and that whatever he said must be regarded as simply his own views and perhaps merely the "dreams of an old man," he read to Mr. Davis a paper which he had drawn up presenting a scheme which if it could be carried out, he thought would result in permanent peace, and a restoration of the former fraternal relations between the two sections. He prefaced the reading of the paper by saying that he was a "man of southern blood," and ardently desired to see the end of the unhappy struggle. The main features of his plan were that there should be a cessation of hostilities, and that the military forces of the two sections should be united for the purpose of maintaining the Monroe doctrine, which had been flagrantly violated in the invasion of Mexico by a French army, and an attempt to set up an imperial form of government in that country under an Austrian prince. He proposed that a secret treaty should be made, having in view a union of their interests in maintaining the Monroe doctrine. Ever since the invasion of Mexico by the French, the opinion had prevailed that the design of Napoleon III. was primarily to assist the Rebellion. The gathering of a French army on the Rio Grande lent moral support to the South and afforded means for the exportation of large amounts of cotton from the Confederacy and the importation of munitions of war. Mr. Blair was possessed of this idea,—that some engagement existed between the European powers and the Confederate states which presented

a barrier to the fulfillment of the plan which he proposed. He referred to it repeatedly during the interview, but the point was met by Mr. Davis saying that no complication of that kind existed at that time, and that the South was free to act as her interests seemed to dictate. Mr. Davis's apparently favorable reception of his views gave Mr. Blair encouragement, and with warmth and eagerness he expanded his plan and presented it in a most attractive form. As a southerner he did not wish to see the pride of the South humbled, its power broken or its honor tarnished; he would rejoice to see its territory extended even to the Isthmus of Darien, and the whole of Mexico, and the Central American states under the influence of southern ideas. He appeared in the role of an ardent "expansionist" and advocated the "assimilation" of the vast territory of Mexico, which we had generously left untouched by the treaty of Gaudaloupe Hidalgo. He suggested a military convention either on the part of Mr. Lincoln and Mr. Davis, or of General Grant and General Lee, which, secretly conducted, would provide for a cessation of hostilities, and a movement of the armies to the Mexican frontier; that the public mind, North and South, would be captivated by the fresh glories that would be won by their armies; that the bitterness and animosities engendered by the war would pass away under the influence of common sacrifices and sufferings. On the other hand, if the war should be continued, from his observation of the feeling manifested by members of the Confederate Congress, the immediate disintegration of the Confederacy would begin, and as for slavery, it was doomed in any event.

Apparently Mr. Davis was attracted by the unfolding of this plan and threw no obstacles in the way of it. He called Mr. Blair's attention to the fruitless efforts which he had repeatedly made to negotiate with Mr. Lincoln, and did not see his way clear to make the first advances. Mr. Blair replied that President Lincoln himself was earnestly desirous of peace, and while he could not speak authoritatively on the subject, he believed he could arrange for the reception of a commission informally,

or a conference to consider the subject of his proposals. He informed President Davis of the division of sentiment in the cabinet of President Lincoln and in Congress on the question of slavery, and on the other issues which the war had clearly defined and which must be dealt with on its termination; that Mr. Lincoln was moderate and conciliatory in temper and in the policy which he had marked out.

As a result of this interview, Mr. Davis addressed a note to Mr. Blair which he requested him to read to Mr. Lincoln on his return to Washington. The substance of the note was that he had always been and still was ready to receive or send commissioners to treat concerning peace or any other matters affecting the interests of the two countries. He used the expression "two countries," showing his unwillingness even in his dire extremity to give up the contention that the Confederacy was a sovereign and independent nation. Immediately on his return to Washington, Mr. Blair had an audience with Mr. Lincoln, presented the note from Mr. Davis, discussed Richmond politics, told the President what he already knew, that there was a strong peace party among the rebels, impressed the President with the idea that the Confederacy was in great extremity, and that Mr. Davis was ready for peace if he could in any way save the honor of the southern people. He must at the interview have opened the scheme of military intervention in the affairs of Mexico, and intimated that Mr. Davis did not appear averse to such an enterprise. We may very well believe that Mr. Lincoln assumed an attitude of passive receptivity, silently listened and closed the interview with a brief note which he gave to Mr. Blair to take to Richmond and read to Mr. Davis. It was as follows:—

WASHINGTON, January 18, 1865.

F. P. Blair, Esq.,

Sir:—Your having shown me Mr. Davis' letter to you of the 12th inst., you may say to him that I have constantly been, am now, and shall continue ready to receive any agent whom he or any other influential person now resisting the national authority may informally send to me with the view of securing peace to the people of our one common country.

Yours, etc.,

A. LINCOLN.

You will notice that in this brief note, Mr. Lincoln ignores the existence of any state or nation having power to treat for peace, that he deals with Mr. Davis as an individual and makes national unity a condition of even an informal conference. The note is very characteristic, showing Mr. Lincoln's honest straightforwardness, and withal a certain shrewdness. Blair's self-imposed mission as an unrecognized peace mediator now assumes the more important character of a semi-official accredited agent of the government at Washington to Mr. Davis at Richmond, and the government gave him a *quasi* recognition as its agent by calling upon the Navy Department to furnish him with suitable transportation to City Point, and upon army headquarters, to provide comfortable quarters and easy conveyance to the rebel lines.

Bearing this short but important note as his credential, Blair returned to Richmond and delivered the original note to Mr. Davis, remarking as Mr. Davis read it over a second time that "our one common country" was in answer to his "the two countries." Mr. Davis said that he saw such reference was intended. We have no memorandum of this second interview between Mr. Blair and Mr. Davis, but we may well believe that the latter saw that no favorable result was likely to come from a conference based upon such opposing principles. Mr. Blair's work was now done and he disappeared from the scene. Mr. Davis called into his counsel some trusted friends and leaders, among whom was R. M. T. Hunter, formerly United States senator from Virginia, and at this time president *pro tempore* of the Confederate senate. He laid before them the whole course of Mr. Blair's mission, and as a result of their deliberation, he decided to send a commission to Washington to confer informally with President Lincoln in regard to peace. Every step taken by the Confederate government from the beginning of this attempt at peace negotiations was made with the utmost secrecy; those whom President Davis was obliged to consult in regard to the proposed conference were enjoined to hold the matter as strictly confidential and the press was pledged to publish nothing in regard to it. Among those who were consulted



in regard to the utility of a conference was Alexander H. Stephens, vice-president of the Confederate states. He was strongly in favor of peace and thought favorably of Mr. Blair's scheme of united intervention in Mexico. Mr. Davis urged upon him very strongly the acceptance of a place upon the commission which he was to appoint, but he declined at first, chiefly on the ground that his absence from the city would be noted, especially if Mr. Hunter should also be a member. He urged upon Mr. Davis a personal interview between himself and Mr. Lincoln, suggesting that such a conference might be held at City Point without attracting notice. Such a conference, however, was wholly averse to Mr. Davis's views, and the result was that Mr. Stephens, Mr. Hunter and Judge J. A. Campbell, assistant secretary of war, were appointed as commissioners. No three men could have been selected of greater authority or higher character than these. They were well equipped by a life-long training for the consideration of the most difficult questions which could be presented in so important a conference. Their mental equipment was supplemented by a conservative temperament, and an ardent and sincere desire for peace. Although every effort had been made to keep their mission secret, it became noised about that peace negotiations were on foot, so when they appeared at the line of the rebel army near Petersburg, the purpose of their coming was well understood in the camps, and as they passed through the rebel lines, their departure was greeted with tumultuous cheering on the part of the rebel soldiers, showing most plainly their desire for peace and approval of their mission. An interesting incident occurred at this point. The lines of the two armies were so near together, that any unusual commotion on either side was immediately known to the opposing force, and drew forth from them some response. In this case, the rebel cheers were answered by a band stationed at some division headquarters near the Union line with the tune of "Yankee Doodle," which was greeted with cheers from the Union side; then the same band struck up "Dixie," which was answered in a similar manner from the rebel

lines; finally it played in its sweetest and tenderest manner "Home, Sweet Home." As this ended, the enthusiasm on both the Union and rebel sides was vociferous and unbounded.

The commission reached the Union lines on the Ninth Corps front, General Willcox at that time commanding. He referred their request to pass through the Union lines to General Ord, commanding the Army of the James, and at that time the ranking officer in the two armies confronting the Army of Northern Virginia. In the temporary absence of General Grant, General Ord referred their communication direct to the War Department at Washington, and soon received a reply that the President would send a messenger to meet them at or near the place where they now were. Major Eckert, aide-de-camp to the President, was dispatched with instructions to General Ord to procure for him an interview with Messrs. Stephens, Hunter and Campbell, and by his direction pass them through his lines. The instructions given Major Eckert to govern him in his interview with these gentlemen were most carefully drawn and explicit. He was instructed to place in their hands a paper on which his own letter was written, on the reverse side of which was the President's letter to Mr. Blair of January 18, to which I have just referred, noting on his own copy the person to whom and the time when delivered. If the commissioners desired an informal conference on the basis of that letter and would so notify him in writing, he was to obtain for them a pass through our lines to Fortress Monroe, where they would be met by persons authorized to confer with them and would be given protection and a safe return. Every effort was made by the President to prevent any misunderstandings or entanglements that would in any way compromise him. Before the departure of his aide, however, a dispatch was received by the President from General Grant transmitting an application from the commissioners made to him for permission to pass through his lines, and proceed to Washington to hold a conference with President Lincoln on the subject of the existing war in order to ascertain upon what terms it could be ended in pursuance of the

course indicated in his letter of January 18, to Mr. Blair. Without communicating with Washington, General Grant admitted the gentlemen through his lines and received them at his own headquarters. Major Eckert's instructions were varied to agree with the changed conditions involved in the course pursued by General Grant and he left for City Point, January 31. Immediately after the departure of General Eckert, the secretary of state was dispatched to Fortress Monroe to meet the commission and informally confer with them on the basis of the letter to Mr. Blair. He was instructed to make known to them the following propositions as the basis upon which terms of peace could be discussed:—

1st. "Restoration of national authority in all the states.

2d. "No receding by the executive of the United States from the position taken on the slavery question in his last annual message, or in previous documents.

3d. "No cessation of hostilities until the forces hostile to the United States are disbanded. He was directed in no event 'to definitely consummate anything.'"

February 1, Major Eckert was closeted with the commissioners at General Grant's quarters, informed them of the President's instructions to him, received their reply, which was not satisfactory to him as it did not comply literally with his formula told them that they could not proceed further, and notified the President of his action and his purpose to return to Washington the next day. At this point General Grant intervenes in behalf of the commissioners in a long despatch to Washington, in which he expresses his belief that they were sincerely desirous of restoring peace on the basis of the Union; that it would have a bad effect if they returned to Richmond without an expression of their views to some one in authority; that their letter to him, (which Major Eckert transmitted in his dispatch) seemed to him to cover the requirements contained in his instructions to Major Eckert. Perhaps Major Eckert stood too stiffly on the exact terms of his instructions. The President immediately responded that he would personally meet the gentlemen off

Fortress Monroe as soon as he could get there. It has sometimes been asserted that Mr. Lincoln followed Mr. Seward to the peace conference, fearing that the secretary might in so important a matter make some admission or concession or counter-proposition that would involve him in trouble, when the time for the discussion of definite peace proposals arrived. His correspondence with Grant at this time shows that his course was taken with a frank and honest desire to relieve the general from the embarrassing position in which he felt that he was placed, as well as to make good his oft expressed desire to listen to any proposal looking toward peace. Before the President left for Fortress Monroe, a telegram was received from General Grant saying the gentlemen had accepted the proposed terms (meaning those proposed in Major Eckert's instructions), and would proceed to Fortress Monroe.

February 3, in the saloon of the steamer "River Queen" anchored in Hampton Roads, there gathered a most notable as well as representative company of men. All, except the President, were equipped by long training in the highest offices of state to deal with the great questions of government and state craft in their political, legal and social aspects. The President, the unique figure in the group, towering above the others in intellectual and moral power, as well as in stature, with a clear, keen vision of the results which would in the future unfold themselves from the principles and policy which he had followed through four years of war and intense political strife with unwavering faith and fortitude, lacked the diplomatic skill, the philosophical cast of mind, the refined subtlety which were characteristic of the others, especially of Messrs. Seward and Stephens; but he had an honesty of purpose, a directness of thought and speech and an irresistible logic that interposed an impassable barrier to the specious attempts that were made to entangle him. He came possessed of lofty ideas and principles which he had wrought out in the stress of battle, which he would not allow to be transgressed; but still he hoped that they would accept these principles as the preliminary conditions of a firm

peace. The rebel commissioners came determined to avoid and put aside a discussion of the under-lying principles that were involved in the long struggle; they offered a miserable makeshift which they hoped that Mr. Lincoln in his ardent desire for peace would accept. These men were bold and immoderate in their proposals. They knew that the Confederacy was already tottering to its fall; they already heard the tramp of Sherman's legions marching northward through the Carolinas; Sheridan with his powerful cavalry was just then crossing to the south side of the James to gain the left of Grant's army, intent to fasten upon the only remaining line of supply for the rebel army and capitol, and Grant was only waiting the coming of Sheridan and hard roads to move again upon the weakened line of Lee. None other than these five were in the cabin of the steamer.

After an exchange of the ordinary courtesies, both parties agreed that the discussion should be informal and that no note or memorandum of the conversation should be made. Some years after, Mr. Stephens wrote out from his recollection the main points of the discussion. The report which the rebel commissioners made to their government and that Mr. Lincoln offered in response to a resolution of Congress calling for information were brief and dealt only with the results of the conference.

Mr. Stephens addressing President Lincoln expressed the hope that a way might be found to restore the states to their former happy relations. The President answered that the way was open and easy. All that was necessary was that resistance to the national authority should cease. Mr. Stephens then adroitly inquired of the President if there was not some other proposition or plan that could be offered that would turn the attention of the two sections from their present trouble until their blood cooled and their animosities subsided, when they could approach the settlement of their difficulties in a more amiable mood, and with better prospect of success than now? "Laying aside our national questions for the present, is there not a continental question that we can give our attention to?" Mr. Lincoln at

once saw that Mr. Blair's scheme was in their possession, and that they would try and bridge the chasm with it. He said frankly that he saw that they referred to Mr. Blair's plan, but that it originated with Mr. Blair and had no authority from him; indeed, that Mr. Blair broached the subject to him and that he told him plainly that he did not want to hear anything in regard to it; that the restoration of the Union was the only basis upon which he was willing to negotiate for peace. Notwithstanding Mr. Lincoln's disavowal of any connection with Mr. Blair's scheme, Mr. Stephens persisted in the belief that the President was committed to it, and only required a pledge that the Union should be ultimately restored. So, after a brief silence, he proceeds to develop the Mexican plan to support the Monroe doctrine. He called the President's attention to the sentiment at the North in favor of opposing the establishment of an empire in Mexico, as evidenced by the speeches of prominent men, and the tone of the newspapers, and that his administration was on record as opposed to it. "Can we not then agree to a suspension of hostilities — unite in sustaining the Monroe doctrine with reference to Mexico? Would not success in this adventure render more probable the restoration of the Union than any pledge now given?" Mr. Lincoln replied firmly: that authoritative assurances must be given for the restoration of the Union before military operations could cease; no armistice could be considered on the proposed basis. The paramount question at the present time is the settlement of our own difficulties and the re-establishment of the national authority.

The conference might have ended here, for the rebel commissioners were not empowered to give the pledge the President required, had not Mr. Seward intervened and expressed a desire that Mr. Stephens should more fully elaborate his views. This Mr. Stephens proceeded to do by declaring that the Monroe doctrine meant the autonomous government of all states on this continent; that this principle was sacred both to the North and South; that Napoleon had violated this principle by his invasion of Mexico. "Let us unite in maintaining this doctrine by

driving the French invaders out of Mexico, firmly establishing the right of local self-government, and the seceded states will soon return to their old relations in the Union by a natural law of political gravitation." The discussion was continued by Mr. Stephens and Mr. Seward for some time on the theory of state sovereignty, which the former had so speciously presented. The dialectics of these two philosophers, who much resembled each other in their intellectual make-up, did not interest the President who soon broke in with a more decided statement of his views, saying that he could not enter into any treaty, convention, stipulation or agreement with the Confederate states, jointly or singly, while they were resisting national authority; that after four years of war, during which he had constantly contended for this point, he was not to abandon his contention and give even a *quasi* recognition to states still in rebellion; that by so doing, he would be virtually granting what they had endeavored with all the diplomatic skill they could employ to induce the nations of Europe to concede. Mr. Stephens suggested in reply that the point made by the President of the recognition of the independence of the Confederate states by entering into any agreement with them might be avoided by a military convention, which he as commander-in-chief undoubtedly had a constitutional right to enter upon. Mr. Lincoln while agreeing with him as to his legal right to take such a course briefly reasserted his position, and the attack at this point was abandoned. Judge Campbell now inquired of the President what his plan was for the restoration of the Union if the Confederate states would agree to it. "Simply disband your armies, and permit Federal officers to resume their functions" replied Mr. Lincoln. "In stating a single condition of peace, I mean simply to say that the war will cease on the part of the government whenever it shall have ceased on the part of those who began it." He said he would retract nothing of what he had said in regard to slavery; the emancipation proclamation must stand; those who are free under it must remain free as far as any act of his was concerned. As to the questions

which should arise as a result of the war, he assured them that he should, as far as the power to deal with them lay with him, use the utmost liberality — pains and penalties would be fully remitted, the pardoning power liberally exercised. In regard to property rights which had been affected by confiscation acts the courts must decide, and Congress might indemnify. In answer to a question by Mr. Stephens as to what would be the status of the slave population, which had not then become free under the terms of the emancipation proclamation, Mr. Lincoln said that must be judicially determined; his own opinion, however, was that as that was adopted as a war measure, it was operative only while the war lasted, but the courts might decide that it covered all who were affected by it at the time it was issued. The rebel commissioners at this point were informed, what they had probably not yet learned, that Congress had only a few days before, January 31, proposed a constitutional amendment, the XIII, for abolishing slavery throughout the United States. Mr. Seward adroitly suggested that as this was a war measure, if the war should cease, it might fail of ratification by three-fourths of the states then in the Union, and if the seceding states could resume their positions in the Union, they could prevent its ratification. This news about the action of Congress must have been a severe blow to the hopes of the rebel commissioners — especially to Mr. Stephens, who saw the “corner stone” which he had laid for his political edifice suddenly removed. Mr. Stephens asked “What would be the relation of the seceded states to the Union if they were to abandon the war? Would they be entitled to representation?” Mr. Lincoln in reply sketched his plan of reconstruction and expressed the opinion, that when the states laid down their arms and submitted to national authority the senators and representatives chosen by them ought to be admitted to Congress. When pressed to come to some agreement on this point, Mr. Lincoln again urged that he could enter into no agreement with those in arms against the government. Mr. Hunter endeavored to show Mr. Lincoln that he might with propriety enter into treaty relations with his



rebellious people, and cited several historical precedents in support of his contention, instancing among others those between Charles I. and his subjects in arms against him. Mr. Lincoln with an expressive look and twinkle in his eye said that he was not familiar with history — that on all such matters, he turned to Seward. He did, however, distinctly recollect that in the end Charles I. lost his head. Thereupon silence fell on the company, and the point was not further pressed. Mr. Stephens does not seem to have been much impressed with the dignity of our great President, for he remarked that he addressed both himself and Mr. Seward in a very familiar manner as “Stephens” and “Seward.” No progress being made in coming to any agreement upon the fundamental points of the controversy, the conversation drifted into a discussion of collateral and far-away topics. Mr. Lincoln gave a statement of his views in regard to slavery and the power of the government to control and regulate it.

Mr. Seward entered into a long history of the growth of anti-slavery sentiment in the country, and believed that the “irrepressible conflict” would end much sooner than he had once thought. Mr. Hunter inquired as to the status of West Virginia — would she be deprived of separate statehood and again brought under the jurisdiction of the old state of Virginia? Mr. Lincoln was very decidedly of the opinion that she would continue a separate state. It having become apparent to all that there was no possibility of fixing a basis upon which terms of peace could be made to rest, the discussion ceased, but Mr. Hunter briefly went over the points that had been considered, and with much warmth said the result of the conference could be summed up in a few words: That peace could only be had by the unconditional submission of the South; that the terms were such as the conquerors give the vanquished. Mr. Seward objected to the harsh conclusion at which he had arrived and submitted that there was nothing in the discussion that warranted such expressions as “unconditional submission,” “the conquerors,” “the vanquished.” Mr. Hunter still maintained

that his conclusions were the logical result of the propositions which had been made by the other side, and were expressed in fitting language. Mr. Seward emphasized the President's position, that the conditions of peace were: Cessation of resistance to established authority; the re-establishment of the functions of the national government throughout the South — that there can be no compromise on these points; when they are accepted, the states in rebellion can assume their former practical relations with the other states in the Union, and have all their rights under the constitution safe-guarded. Mr. Lincoln said that he could only speak for the executive, but that it was his decision and purpose to deal most liberally with the seceded states; that there were questions that would come up in the reconstruction of the government, which were beyond the scope of executive authority, and must be dealt with by the courts and Congress. He expressed the hope that Congress might indemnify the holders of slaves for the loss of their property, and intimated that he would recommend an appropriation of four hundred millions for this purpose. After four hours of fruitless discussion conducted in a courteous manner, the impassable gulf still remained open, no one being able or willing to leap in and close it. At Mr. Stephens's urgent request, the President promised to reconsider the subject, but gave no encouragement that there would be any change in his views. After a brief discussion in regard to the exchange of prisoners, which was referred to General Grant with power to act, the conference closed, Mr. Lincoln and Mr. Seward first leaving the saloon of the steamer, then the other gentlemen in charge of Colonel Babcock of General Grant's staff.

Thus ended this historic scene. The President and Secretary Seward returned to Washington; Mr. Stephens and his associates by way of General Grant's headquarters to Richmond. Mr. Stephens testifies that, in his interview with General Grant, the general expressed himself as greatly disappointed at the result. At Richmond, the feeling of disappointment at the failure of the peace mission was most pronounced; the gloom that

had previously settled upon the city was deepened. Mr. Davis felt keenly the fruitless result of the conference and taxed Mr. Lincoln with a lack of good faith, ascribing his change of sentiment in regard to peace, first expressed to Mr. Blair, as due to the great Union success in the capture of Fort Fisher, which had occurred in the interval between his interview with Blair and the conference at Hampton Roads, and which the rebel leaders regarded as one of the severest blows the Confederacy had ever received. The opinion of two of the rebel commissioners in regard to the continuance of the hopeless struggle, which they knew must soon end in the defeat and perhaps destruction of Lee's army and the fall of Richmond, and the advisability of an immediate acceptance of the terms proposed by the President, may be gathered from the events of the few days next following their arrival at Richmond. At a prolonged interview with President Davis, they gave a detailed account of the conference and the course of the discussion. Judge Campbell expressed the opinion that they should be authorized to return immediately and take up the discussion of peace proposals on the basis offered by Mr. Lincoln. Mr. Stephens's course during the next few days shows that he was of a similar opinion. He declined to second Mr. Davis's efforts to arouse the people from their lethargy and despair. A mass meeting was held in Richmond at the African church the second night after their return, at which Mr. Stephens was urged to be present and address the people, but he declined on the ground that he would be false to his convictions if he should advise the South still to continue a struggle on the lines marked out by Mr. Davis and which he knew was useless. So bidding Mr. Davis a courteous farewell, he stamped the mud of Richmond from his feet, abandoned his post as vice-president, proceeded to his home in Georgia and quietly awaited the catastrophe which he saw near at hand and which no human power could avert.

The whole North knew of the presence of Stephens and his associates at City Point while on their way to carry out their mission and easily divined their purpose. When Mr. Lincoln

and Mr. Seward left Washington for Fortress Monroe, the interest and excitement increased. A fierce debate in Congress on the subject of the conference led to an attack upon the President by Mr. Stevens in the House and Mr. Wade in the Senate, who impugned the motives and purposes of the President, and accused him of following Secretary Seward to the conference because he feared that the secretary would be too radical in his views and impose conditions which the South would not accept. The President was defended by Doolittle, of Wisconsin, in the Senate, and, unfortunately, by Fernando Wood and Cox in the House. The tension in Congress between the radical and conservative factions of the Republican party over this peace conference was intense, but was partially allayed by the return of the President and Secretary Seward and the knowledge that the conference was fruitless of results. A resolution was immediately adopted in the House, requesting information in relation to the conference. In response, the President transmitted all the documents relating to it from first to last. The reading of it shut the mouths of the President's assailants, stopped all cavilling, and at the close loud and prolonged applause marked the approval of the House.

Immediately on his return to Washington, Mr. Seward addressed a circular letter to our ministers in Europe, informing them of the conference, detailing the steps leading up to it, the conditions under which it was held, the subjects discussed, and the fruitless issue of it, except so far as it afforded an opportunity for a free interchange of opinion and views between the President and prominent insurgents. The purpose of the despatch and the intention of the secretary of state without doubt was indirectly to apprise the French government of the fact that proposals had come from representatives of the Confederate government looking to "the mutual direction of the efforts of the government, as well as those of the insurgents, to some extrinsic policy or scheme for a season, during which passions might be expected to subside, and the armies be reduced and trade and intercourse between the people of both sections resumed."

The French government, if not otherwise definitely informed in regard to it, would demand of our government or the Confederate government what the "extrinsic policy" referred to meant. Indeed, we have reason to believe that the representatives of the Confederate government in France were immediately called upon to explain the meaning of the term "extrinsic policy." It was in itself too obvious a reference to interference with French designs in Mexico not to excite the liveliest interest and apprehension in the minds of the French government. The design of the secretary without doubt was to alarm the French government and prejudice the Confederate government in their eyes. Two months later came the collapse of the Confederacy, when General Lee surrendered to General Grant. The military convention between these two great leaders provided for the surrender and disbandment of the Army of Northern Virginia, and extended to the officers and soldiers the protection of the government as long as their paroles were observed. Before the first of June every army in the South had accepted the same conditions, had disbanded, and officers and soldiers had returned to the peaceful pursuits of life. It is doubtful if any commission like that which assembled at Fortress Monroe could have laid the foundations of a peace so satisfactory and acceptable to the South as those which General Grant so generously offered to General Lee at Appomattox. It required Grant's popularity and the authority of his great name to suppress the *vae victis* spirit which the successes of the Union arms was inflaming at the North. Indeed it required the intervention of his authority, before the month in which Lee surrendered his army had passed, to prevent the terms of the capitulation from being violated by the federal government in Virginia through the proposed indictment and prosecution of General Lee himself.





